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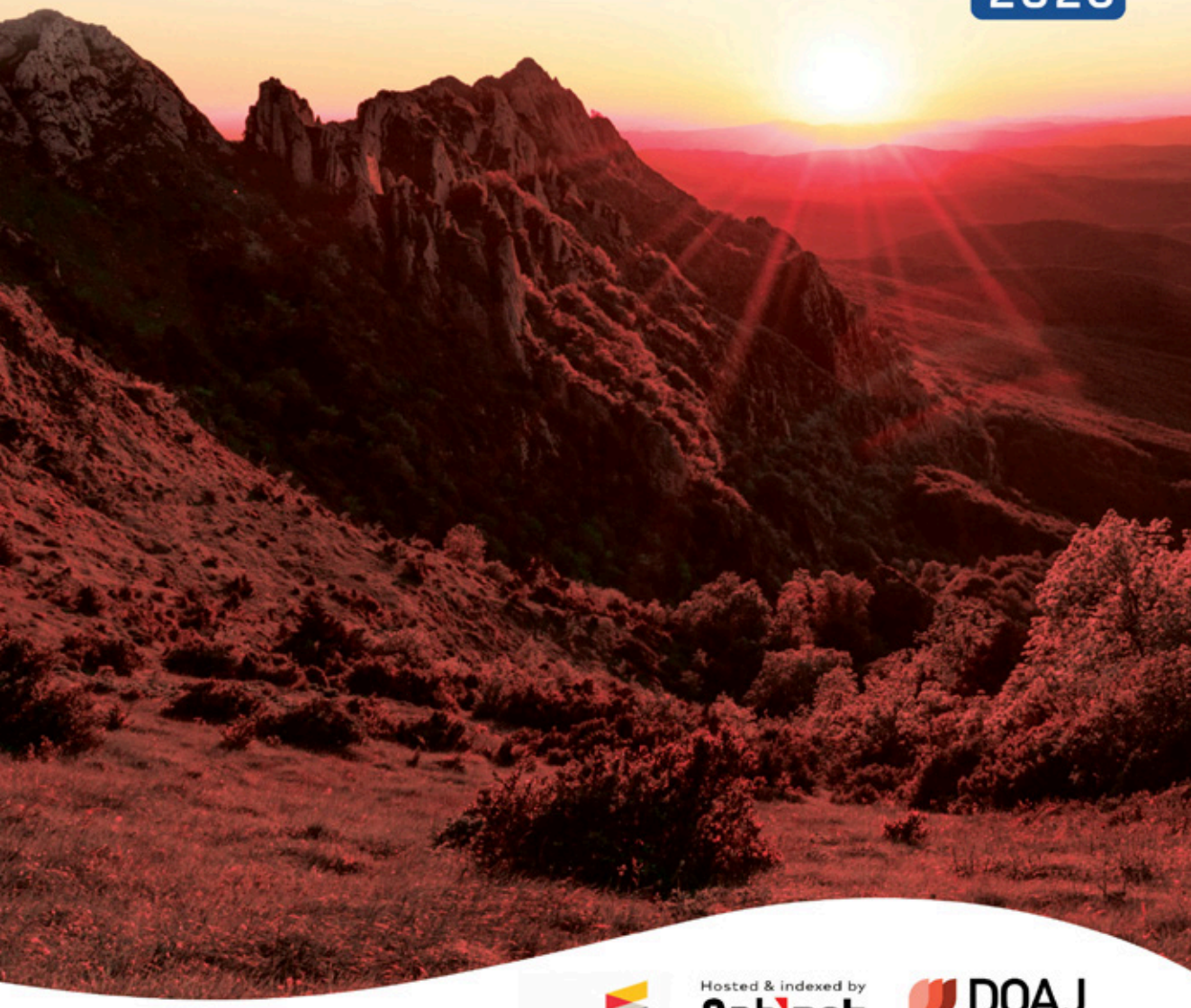

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Writing and Publishing in a standardised language with a dialect bias: Implications for Shona Literature Development in Zimbabwean Education

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of dialect bias in standardised Shona on the development of Shona literature in Zimbabwe. While Shona has multiple dialects, the Zezuru-based version is privileged in education and literature, marginalising other dialects like Karanga, Manyika, and Korekore. The research employed a qualitative approach using interviews and textual analysis to explore the challenges faced by novice Shona writers and their effects on literary creation and reception. Ten participants were purposively sampled, including writers, editors, and reviewers across the country. The gathered data were thematically analysed, and the study was informed by the Cultural Capital Theory. The study found that the dominance of Zezuru-based Shona creates barriers for speakers of other dialects, who feel disconnected from literature that does not reflect their linguistic and cultural realities. It concluded that this bias inhibits linguistic diversity and creativity, impacting the production and consumption of Shona literature in education. The study advocates for a more inclusive approach to standardisation that preserves dialectal diversity, accessibility, and engagement in schools while promoting national linguistic identity for a richer and more engaging literary landscape.

Keywords

Shona, novice speaker-writer, literature, orthography, language planning,

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word division.

Introduction

The standardisation of Shona, historically shaped by a Zezuru bias, influences Zimbabwe's literary and educational landscapes. Although standardisation was intended to promote linguistic cohesion, it has inadvertently marginalised other dialects, with significant consequences for literary production. The insistence on 'standard' Shona remains a contentious, though insufficiently interrogated, issue within Zimbabwe's literary sector, presenting challenges to both emerging and established writers attached to their ethnic dialects. Madusise (2022) observes that writers from marginalised dialect communities struggle to publish works in their native varieties because publishers generally favour standardised, Zezuru-based Shona. Writers may be compelled to abandon their ethnic idioms in favour of an aggregated form of Shona, partly because of the difficult book market and restrictive publishing conditions currently prevailing in Zimbabwe.

Historically, the standardisation project originated with missionary linguistic interventions, was formalised through Doke's work in 1931 and the Shona Language Committee, and was institutionalised by the Southern Rhodesia Literature Bureau from 1954, culminating in the publication of the *Standard Shona Dictionary* in 1959. Critics contend that this process homogenised Shona at the expense of the linguistic distinctiveness of its constituent dialects. Although considerable scholarship has examined the linguistic choices made by Doke in 1931, contemporary developments in African language planning make it necessary to revisit their continuing consequences (Mazuruse, 2024). The historical decisions remain consequential in contemporary publishing, where manuscripts written predominantly in Shona dialects other than Zezuru encounter significant barriers to publication. The persistence of this linguistic hierarchy raises important questions about dialect representation, literary creativity and cultural inclusion. Against this background, the article explores the challenges speaker-writers encounter when using 'standard' Shona in creative writing and considers how these constraints might be addressed

without undermining linguistic intelligibility and the broader communicative functions of standardisation.

Literature Review

This section reviews scholarly debates on the implications of dialect bias in standardised Shona for literary development and education in Zimbabwe. It interrogates how the privileging of linguistic varieties within the standardisation process has shaped literary production, publishing practices, cultural representation and educational participation. The review further identifies gaps in scholarship concerning the relationship between standardisation, dialect diversity and linguistic inclusion. In doing so, it establishes the conceptual and empirical foundation for examining how standardised Shona can accommodate dialect diversity without compromising the communicative value of a common written language. Attention is given to emerging arguments for more inclusive models of standardisation and to the need for language policies that accommodate Shona dialects within literary production and educational curricula.

Scholarship on Shona standardisation demonstrates that the process was neither linguistically neutral nor merely technical. The emergence of standard Shona involved institutional choices concerning dialect classification, selection, orthography and codification, initially shaped by competing missionary interests and subsequently formalised through colonial language planning (Doke, 1931; Chimhundu, 1992, 2005). Chimhundu (1992) demonstrates how missionary linguistic politics contributed to the construction and promotion of Zezuru, Karanga and Manyika as major dialect groupings subsequently accommodated within Doke's unified Shona orthography. Standardisation is understood not simply as the creation of a common written language, but as a process through which linguistic varieties acquired greater institutional visibility and authority than others.

Rather, the selection, codification and institutionalisation of linguistic forms produced hierarchies among varieties subsequently classified as Shona dialects. The exclusion of substantial lexical resources from Manyika, Ndau, Karanga and Korekore contributed to their stigmatisation while simultaneously consolidating Zezuru as the prestigious variety (Mberi, Masowa & Gopo, 2022). Such hierarchisation has implications beyond linguistic form because dialects encode cultural memory, local traditions and identities. Taringana (2022) characterises the marginalisation of supposedly 'inferior' dialects as a form

of generational social genocide insofar as it potentially denies communities opportunities to maintain their language and cultural practices. Further, although standardisation sought to facilitate communication among Shona speakers, it also generated linguistic hierarchies that continue to affect literary production and inclusion (Chimhundu, 1992).

The historical origins of these inequalities are particularly significant. Doke's 1931 recommendations concerning indigenous languages were characterised, by what Nyota and Mapara (2014) describe as more by exclusion than inclusion, because some linguistic varieties were effectively removed from Zimbabwe's national linguistic space, increasing their vulnerability to marginalisation and possible extinction. The ethno-linguistic categories that subsequently came to characterise Shona were themselves substantially shaped by missionary interventions that constructed regional linguistic identities now commonly described as dialects (Chimhundu, 1992a, 1997). Doke (1931) recognised five principal Shona dialects, Zezuru, Karanga, Manyika, Ndau and Korekore, but based the standard orthography predominantly on Zezuru, secondarily on Karanga, and to a lesser extent on Manyika, Ndau and Korekore (Chimhundu, 2010b). Standardisation, therefore, did not merely establish common orthographic conventions; it institutionalised unequal representation among varieties incorporated within the Shona linguistic cluster.

The persistence of this imbalance has generated calls for a more inclusive conception of standard Shona. Mazuruse (2022) argues that an equitable orthography should accord varieties within the Shona cluster comparable opportunities for representation and use. Early Shona literary production itself demonstrates the persistence of dialect identities despite attempts at standardisation. Writers and scholars such as Dembetembe on Korekore, Pongweni on Karanga, Sharai Mukonoweshuro and Mkanganwi on Ndau foregrounded dialect-specific linguistic identities, revealing competing conceptions of what constituted legitimate Shona expression (Makoni, 2000). These practices indicate that standardisation did not eliminate dialect consciousness but instead created continuing tensions between institutional linguistic norms and speakers' everyday linguistic repertoires. The writing system currently used by Shona speakers is deficient because it inadequately accommodates dialectal variation and restricts speakers' ability to represent in writing the language they ordinarily speak. This produces a disjunction between home language practices and formally sanctioned written Shona. The problem is, therefore. not simply one of orthographic difference but of linguistic

legitimacy: Certain forms of Shona acquire institutional authority while others remain confined largely to informal and domestic domains. Taringana (2022) cautions against homogenised, one-size-fits-all approaches to linguistic and cultural problems affecting communities with distinctive regional experiences.

Recent scholarship advocates more inclusive approaches to Shona standardisation and harmonisation. Recognising language variation at different levels can reduce the problems associated with rigid dialect labelling, regionalism and tribalism. Similarly, multilingualism as a linguistic resource can weaken rigid ethnic boundaries rather than as an obstacle requiring elimination (Mazuruse, 2024; Prah, 2014). From this perspective, linguistic diversity becomes a resource for cultural and literary production rather than a deficiency to be corrected through homogenisation. Hence, Mberi, Masowa and Gopo (2022) proposed an inclusive standardisation process capable of narrowing the divide between prestigious and stigmatised dialects while retaining the communicative advantages of a shared Shona language.

Emerging approaches also suggest possibilities beyond conventional monolithic standardisation. Jones and Uribe-Jongbloed (2020), for example, discuss pluricentric approaches that permit multiple legitimate centres of linguistic authority. Applied to Shona, such an approach could potentially accommodate dialectal variation within a broader common linguistic framework rather than requiring speakers to suppress regional forms. Digital publishing further complicates conventional mechanisms of linguistic control because online platforms and social media enable writers to publish dialect-rich material without necessarily passing through traditional editorial and publishing gatekeepers. These developments raise an important question insufficiently addressed in existing Shona scholarship: whether contemporary technological and pluricentric models can reconcile linguistic diversity with the practical requirements of standardisation.

The consequences of Shona standardisation are particularly visible in literary production. Chimhundu (2010) found that the historical process consolidated the hegemony of Zezuru while marginalising other Shona varieties, with Kalanga, Utee, Hwesa, Barwe and Nambya ultimately treated as separate minority languages. Within this hierarchy, linguistic correctness has frequently been judged against Zezuru-dominated conventions (Mangeya, 2022). Forms that depart from these conventions risk being interpreted as linguistic deviance rather than legitimate manifestations of dialect variation. This distinction has

important implications for determining whose language enters published literature and whose remains excluded from formal literary spaces.

Officially recognised indigenous languages can become languages in search of speakers while everyday urban vernaculars remain spoken varieties in search of legitimacy (Makoni, 2000). The observation exposes a fundamental tension between codified language policy and actual linguistic practice. Mheta (2011) similarly criticised standard Shona for constructing dialects as superior or inferior. Mheta further argued that harmonisation cannot produce genuine linguistic unity where the standard variety itself is founded upon unequal representation. A linguistic union in which some varieties contribute substantially more than others risks reproducing hierarchy under the language of standardisation.

The problem is compounded by continuing uncertainty surrounding codification. Shona standardisation, particularly at the level of codification, remains incomplete (Chimhundu, 2002). Despite political independence and subsequent developments in language policy, discrepancies persist between formal orthographic conventions and evolving patterns of Shona usage. This creates difficulties for writers expected to produce literary works according to a standard that does not always correspond with their spoken linguistic repertoires. The persistence of these discrepancies strengthens the case for reconsidering whether the existing orthography adequately reflects contemporary Shona usage.

Dialect bias has implications for creativity, cultural representation and readership. Language encodes the ecological, historical and social experiences through which communities construct meaning and transmit locally developed knowledge (Taringana, 2022). Restricting dialectal expression therefore potentially narrows not only vocabulary but also the cultural worlds available for literary representation. For creative writers, dialect can perform aesthetic and ideological functions by locating characters socially and geographically, preserving oral traditions, expressing humour and communicating culturally embedded meanings. Excessive standardisation may therefore produce linguistic uniformity at the expense of literary authenticity and representational diversity.

Writing and publishing in Shona under the prescribed orthography can be particularly demanding for emerging writers whose everyday speech differs substantially from the standard. Madusise (2022) notes that writing requires

mastery of conventions governing vocabulary, spelling, punctuation and related orthographic practices. For speakers of marginalised dialects, however, spoken forms do not always correspond with the conventions of a predominantly Zezuru-based orthography. Writers must negotiate between the linguistic forms through which they ordinarily construct meaning and those recognised as legitimate in formal publishing. This tension makes language geographically and culturally consequential because dialect connects literary expression to the realities of communities. What remains insufficiently established in existing scholarship is precisely how these tensions influence writers' creative choices, access to publishers, and the development of Shona literature as a culturally representative national literature.

The consequences of standardisation extend beyond publishing into formal education. Doke's 1931 recommendations contributed to the development of a standard written Shona that does not always correspond with what learners acquire in their homes and communities. Mazuruse (2024) reports that learners from Karanga, Korekore and Manyika-speaking backgrounds can encounter difficulties with standardised Shona because of lexical and phonological differences. The educational issue is, therefore, not simply whether learners can acquire standard Shona, but whether the education system places unequal linguistic demands on learners according to their dialect backgrounds.

The same tension affects the relationship between education and literary production. Creative works written predominantly in non-Zezuru dialects may encounter resistance within conventional publishing structures (Chimhenga & Chivhanga, 2014). Where published and prescribed literature predominantly reflects the standard variety, learners from marginalised dialect communities encounter a literary language that may differ significantly from their everyday speech. Taringa (2024), examining the relationship between spoken Karanga and written Shona, identified a disjunction between the linguistic resources possessed by native Karanga-speaking learners and the language valorised within formal education. From this perspective, standard Shona does not automatically constitute cultural or linguistic capital equally accessible to all Shona-speaking learners.

This asymmetry has implications for educational equity. If mastery of the standard is partly conditioned by proximity between a learner's home dialect and the linguistic variety privileged by the education system, learners do not enter Shona classrooms from equivalent linguistic positions. Standardisation

may convert dialect difference into educational advantage or disadvantage. Such an outcome is especially significant where proficiency in standard Shona determines performance in assessment, access to prescribed literature and perceptions of linguistic competence. Dialect bias may, therefore, affect not only language learning but also learner participation, confidence and engagement with Shona literature.

The relationship between education and literary diversity is equally consequential. Writers from 'marginalised' dialect communities experience difficulties publishing in their native varieties because publishers tend to favour Zezuru-based standard Shona (Zimunya, 2011). Such restrictions potentially reduce linguistic diversity in published literature and constrain the representation of regional cultural identities. They may also discourage younger writers whose linguistic repertoires differ from the prescribed standard, thereby narrowing both the quantity and diversity of literary texts available for educational use.

Given that Shona literature, as used in the education system, may contribute to learners' language development, vocabulary, critical thinking, instil cultural heritage, and induce identity formation (Mufanechiya & Mufanechiya, 2015). As such, the linguistic composition of such a literature matters. Where speaker-writers repeatedly produce orthographic forms judged unacceptable by the educational and publishing institutions, the problem cannot automatically be attributed to individual incompetence. It may also indicate structural tension between the prescribed orthography and the linguistic repertoires developed through everyday language use. Kadenge and Mugari (2015), for example, identified lexical and phonological challenges experienced by learners with Karanga and Manyika-speaking backgrounds, while Taringa (2024) similarly questions the educational implications of Zezuru dominance.

Taken together, the literature demonstrates substantial agreement that Shona standardisation has generated enduring tensions between linguistic uniformity and dialect diversity. Existing scholarship has established the historical origins of Zezuru dominance and documented its implications for language identity, orthography and education. What remains less adequately examined is how these structures operate specifically within contemporary literary production: how speaker-writers negotiate the standard, how publishers regulate dialectal variation, how dialect bias influences creative expression, and how published literature subsequently reproduces these linguistic

hierarchies within education. Furthermore, limited scholarship has examined whether pluricentric standardisation, revised orthographic policies and digital publishing could provide viable alternatives to the existing model. These gaps provide the analytical space for the present study to investigate the experiences of Shona speaker-writers and to consider how linguistic standardisation might preserve mutual intelligibility while enabling greater dialectal representation in Zimbabwean literature and education.

Theoretical framework

The Cultural capital theory offers a valuable theoretical framework for understanding the challenges faced by novice Shona speaker-writers and publishers in operating in an environment with a biased standardised language. The study aligns itself with the contention by Bourdieu (1977) that the value ascribed to speech cannot be understood apart from the person who speaks, and the person who speaks cannot be understood apart from the larger networks of social relationships. He states that cultural capital is made up of familiarity with the dominant culture in a society. Along with cultural capital, Bourdieu (1977) speaks of *linguistic capital,* a subset of cultural capital, which allows for an explanation of the unequal linguistic competence of speaker-writers from different dialects. Linguistic capital is passed through the family from parents to their children, and it facilitates language users in claiming their legitimate membership in their linguistic communities. Language is cultural capital, as one realises the influence of language in the sense that one's language is considered either powerful or weak as a resource in education. This means that the speaker-writers are not operating in an equal setting since there are specific differences that embody different dialects. The Cultural capital framework provides an avenue for different linguistic entities to co-exist within the framework of a dominant culture.

By subtly privileging one form of Shona, the rich literary and oral traditions of other dialects are often excluded from formal education and national media. This leads to a form of epistemic violence, where the knowledge and cultural expression of certain groups are deemed less worthy. From a decolonial perspective, the struggle for equitable language policy is not just about fairness; it is about reclaiming linguistic sovereignty, recognising that "all languages are equal," not just in theory, but in practice. Recent decolonial and critical language-policy scholarship advocates for the need to de-naturalise "named languages" and interrogate "standard language ideology" since standardisation

is a socio-historical artefact tied to colonial knowledge projects, not linguistic inevitabilities (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007). Drawing on Bourdieu, it can be argued that 'standard Shona' functions as a gatekeeping norm that converts dialect proximity into educational and literary advantage, reproducing speaker-writer inequality despite constitutional multilingualism. Following Makoni and Pennycook (2007), the 'standard' is not a neutral linguistic fact but a colonial-modern artefact whose authority rests on language-ideology processes of iconisation and erasure. As in South Africa and Nigeria, policy endorsements of multilingualism without field-level redesign leave English or a prestige norm dominant; where markets and rubrics change, room opens for dialect-affirming writing (Irvine and Gal, 2000).

In the context of Zimbabwe, this theory has been applied to understand how language policies and dialects influence educational outcomes and perpetuate social inequalities. In the context of Shona orthography, cultural capital can be seen as the possession of knowledge and skills related to the Shona language's spoken and written forms. This theory may possibly be applicable in the promotion of a standardised Shona language, heavily biased towards the Zezuru dialect, thereby creating a system where native speakers of other dialects, like Karanga, Korekore, Ndau, and Manyika, are at a disadvantage. This is a classic case of what Bourdieu described as the institutionalisation of cultural capital since the Zimbabwean education system formally validates this bias by legitimising the use of the standardised Zezuru-based Shona in textbooks, exams, and teacher training.

Standard Shona, just like the English language, is, to an extent, a foreign language that is neither native nor cultural capital to the educational success of Karanga learners since it does not carbon copy or represent exactly the way the Karanga people speak in their communities. In other words, a dialect bias in written Shona, heavily influenced by Zezuru dialect dominance, creates linguistic hierarchies that privilege Zezuru over others in education, publishing, and literary recognition, thereby limiting access for speaker-writers of 'marginalised' dialects (Taringa, 2024; Gora, 2017). The linguistic and cultural capital ascribed to the Zezuru variety perpetuates and sustains systems of linguistic inequality

and inevitably gives the impression that they are of more value and use when compared with other less dominant dialects.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative approach comprising document analysis and interviews. This study adopted a purposive sampling strategy, targeting participants who are directly involved in the teaching, writing, and publishing of Shona literature within Zimbabwe's education sector. For this research, the target population was stakeholders in Zimbabwean education and Shona literature. Ten key informants were purposively selected from teachers, language experts, writers, publishers, editors, and curriculum developers. Teachers, students, and parents are the end-users of the literature and were chosen because they are the implementers of the standardised Shona curriculum. Writers, publishers, editors, and curriculum developers were also chosen because they are involved in the production of Shona literature and textbooks, and they contribute to literary works and syllabi. The key informants were purposively selected in different districts to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives across regions, particularly from dialect-diverse areas such as Masvingo, Manicaland, and Mashonaland, and editors from three publishing companies in Gweru. The purposive sampling used ensured that voices from minority dialect groups like Karanga, Manyika, and Korekore were adequately represented.

Participant demographic details such as age, gender, experience, educational background, and geographical location were taken into consideration to ascertain the extent to which regional differences in dialect or access to resources influence their perspectives (Muzari, Shava & Shonhiwa, 2022). These variables were essential to gauge the depth of participants' insights, to identify their dialect identity, and ultimately to highlight how participant backgrounds shape their perceptions of standardised Shona. The study primarily involved qualitative methods like semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and focus group discussions. In-depth interviews were held with purposefully selected participants to explore the practice of Shona speaker-writers on the current use of 'standard' Shona in their writings.

The participants were asked questions about the challenges they encounter as they use the current orthography in writing and editing the manuscripts of Shona literary works. The recorded interviews were later transcribed by the researchers. These methods allow for in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences and opinions. Open coding was employed first to identify

emerging themes, followed by axial coding, which helped to link themes to broader categories such as language policy, identity, pedagogy, and literary development. Documents analysed include textual analysis of written literature to identify common errors that novice speaker-writers commit in writing spelling and word division, as they try to practically apply the rules of the current Shona orthography.

A Shona novel entitled '*Chomubako*' (2020) by Obvious Dzivanyika, poems by Penyai in *Nhekwe Dziri Kanyi* (2011), unpublished Korekore poems by Nongai Tinashe Mutepaire (2024) and Nickson Mufutumari (2024), and Chinyenze and Sithole's (2007) primers and readers' series were used as examples. The case study design helped to explain both the process and outcome of a phenomenon through complete observation, reconstruction, and analysis of the cases under investigation (Tellis, 1997).

Data Validation was used to ensure the accuracy and trustworthiness of the collected data through member checking, where participants reviewed preliminary findings to confirm accuracy (Muzari, Shava & Shonhiwa, 2022). After an interview, the researcher shared a summary of the findings with the participants to confirm that their views had been accurately represented. This is a powerful technique for qualitative research, which was corroborated by peer debriefing with fellow researchers in language and education to help refine interpretations. Triangulation was used whereby multiple data sources were consulted to corroborate or challenge findings across different stakeholder groups (Muzari, Shava & Shonhiwa, 2022). This was significant since it gave a more holistic view of diverse perspectives from different dialect backgrounds. Thematic analysis was the primary analytic approach, organising qualitative data into meaningful categories after data collection and transcription. According to Mirza and Bellalem (2023), ethical considerations are paramount in any research involving human participants, and for this study, important protocols like informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, voluntary participation and formal permission were strictly adhered to. Consent was sought from key informants through the filling in of consent forms or verbal consent. The use

of codes was adopted to protect the privacy and anonymity of the participants. The participants were assured that the study was purely for academic purposes.

Findings and Analysis

The findings are presented and analysed under the main thematic categories that emerge from the study on the implications of writing and publishing in a standardised language with a dialect bias for Shona literature development in Zimbabwean education.

Orthographic challenges by Shona speaker-writers

The development of Shona literature in Zimbabwean education is hindered by challenges linked to the current orthography, which is prescriptive, semantic, and grammar-based rather than phonological. Novice Shona writers struggle to apply the rules, particularly in word division, reduplication, hyphen use, and conjunctives, leading to frequent orthographic errors that confuse both readers and editors. Writers inconsistently apply rules, sometimes writing reduplicated words as single words (for example, *pedopedo* instead of *pedo pedo (very close)*, hyphenating when unnecessary (for example, *mirefu-refu* instead of *mirefurefu (very tall or very long)*, or leaving gaps (*dema dema* instead of *demadema (very black or very dark)*.

Writers wrongly separate verbs instead of using hyphens (*achifamba famba* (walking around) instead of *achifamba-famba*). Inconsistencies arise, as some idiophones are written as hyphenated or joined words, contrary to orthographic rules. Writers misuse conjunctions such as *asi (but)* and *uye (and)*, especially when placed at the beginning of sentences, distorting meaning. Textual analyses of *Chomubako* (Dziwanyika, 2020) and *Ravai ChiShona* (Chinyenze & Sithole, 2007) reveal systemic deviations from 'standard' Shona orthography.

Editors and publishers note that such inconsistencies compromise literary quality and damage credibility. Writers themselves acknowledge confusion and a lack of training in orthographic rules. The problem is compounded by the fact that the Shona orthography has not been revised since 1967, making it outdated and unaligned with spoken Shona.

In *Ravai ChiShona Giredhi 2 Bhuku 1, Mhuri yaVaMadzishe*, phrases like *minda yedu iri pedopedo* (p. 5) (Our fields are very close) show a deviation from 'standard' Shona. In *Ravai ChiShona bhuku I, Giredhi* 3 p. 5, "*Tava kutamba zvino tsoro. Tinotamba tiri vavirivaviri"* (We are playing a strategy board game. We play

in twos), in which *vavirivaviri (in twos)* is reduplicated and should be written as *vaviri vaviri* (in twos) with a gap in between. This demonstrates that current orthography is rigid and grammar-driven, ignoring phonological realities like penultimate stress, which speakers use as natural word markers, and this creates a gap between oral fluency and written competence, disadvantaging novice writers. Examples from primers show that writers often revert to dialectal or spoken conventions, suggesting that 'standard' Shona orthography is alienating and impractical for actual use.

The inconsistent treatment of reduplication (when to join, hyphenate, or separate words) is the most problematic area. The sub-rules themselves are contradictory; for instance, some reduplications (like *mheremhere (loud noise)* are joined into one word if they form a new meaning, but similar constructions (*pedo pedo*) are required to remain separate. This inconsistency fuels confusion and spelling errors. Errors burden editors, slow down production, and reduce the perceived professionalism of Shona literature, limiting its growth and acceptance in education and publishing. Both writers and publishers call for a revision of orthographic rules, suggesting a shift from semantic/grammatical bases to phonological markers (penultimate stress), aligning writing more closely with speech.

In *Chomubako,* one reads an instance: *"Chomubako naNgaachengetwe vairara mumiti mirefu-refu yemubani iri"* (p. 107) (Chomubako and Ngaachengetwe used to sleep in very tall trees of this plain); the author hyphenated *mirefu-refu* (very tall) when it is supposed to be written as one word. In *Chomubako* (p. 4), the author incorrectly wrote the reduplicated adjective *dema dema* (very black) with a gap, instead of the correct 'standard' Shona form *demadema*. This illustrates a common orthographic error in handling reduplicated adjectives. In *Chomubako*, several orthographic errors occur in reduplication. The noun *kure-kure* (very far) is incorrectly hyphenated instead of being written separately as *kure kure*.

Similarly, the verb *achifamba famba* (walking around) is wrongly spaced instead of using a hyphen (*achifamba-famba*), as reduplicated verb stems must always be hyphenated. These errors highlight confusion in applying reduplication rules for nouns, verbs, and idiophones. In 'standard' Shona, conjunctives that consist of more than one syllable and are used to join words, phrases, or clauses are written as separate words even though they mean nothing as standalone words. The use of <asi>, 'but'; <uye> or <uyezve>, 'and', becomes problematic for speaker-writers, rendering the piece of work unreadable.

In *Chomubako,* such errors are numerous, especially in reported speech. Examples include: *Aivawo nhururatsvita pakureba, zvakare ari jinda raMambo rehondo. Asi, aiva pasi pemunin'ina wake pazvidanho apo* (he was exceptionally tall, and the King's war commander. But he was below his young brother in rank (*Chomubako,* p. 2). Once conjunctives are placed at the beginning of a sentence, the sense of that sentence is lost, and the underlying meaning is distorted. Editors interviewed highlighted their role as custodians of orthographic standards, often describing the pressure to align manuscripts with curriculum-driven expectations. They argued that "when manuscripts arrive, they are often written in a mix of dialects; our editorial policy insists on the standardised orthography, not because we prefer one dialect, but because schools and textbooks demand consistency." This shows that editors should balance readability for a broad audience with preserving authentic voice, but because of commercial pressures, they usually serve as gatekeepers, thereby tipping the scale toward standardisation.

Dialectal Resistance in Shona Literature

Shona speaker-writers often use distinct dialects in their creative works, even when these dialects differ from the standard Shona language, which illustrates a practice of dialectal resistance to reclaim cultural identity and disrupt dominant linguistic hierarchies. According to Chimhundu (2005), the Language Committee refused to accept or recognise alternative spelling forms when the differences they represent are greater. There is a phonotactic rule in 'standard' Shona that prohibits the insertion of <w> or <y> glides when a low vowel (a, sometimes e, o) precedes a high vowel (i, u) according to the 'standard' spelling conventions. For example, correct forms are: *raira* ('instruct'), *tsvaira* ('sweep'), *tenda* ('thank'), *murairo* ('rule'), *maheu* ('sweet beer'), *nhau* ('news'). Incorrect or non-standard forms are: *rayira, tsvayira, tendayi, murayiro, mahewu and nhawu.*

This rule reflects efforts to standardise the representation of Shona phonological structures in writing, and it is designed to ensure orthographic consistency and reduce unnecessary letters in writing. However, speaker-writers frequently violate this rule because their spoken dialects often insert glide consonants <w> and <y> naturally in such environments, since the written rule forces them to suppress what feels like a spoken reality. The glide serves as a phonetic buffer that eases pronunciation, making sequences like *raira* ('instruct') more naturally realised as [rayira] in many dialects. Many Bantu orthographies do accept glides in such environments (for example, Zulu orthography allows for *y* and *w* medials). Thus, the difficulty arises from a mismatch between prescriptive

orthography and actual speech habits. The orthography seeks economy and consistency by avoiding "unnecessary" glide insertions, while speakers' phonological instincts incline them toward glide insertion for articulatory ease and dialectal authenticity. It is a natural articulatory phenomenon. The rule prohibiting glide insertion (<w>, <y>) after low vowels before high vowels illustrates the tension between standard orthography and spoken dialectal practice. On the one hand, it enforces orthographic uniformity and reduces redundancy; on the other, it suppresses natural phonetic patterns widely present in Shona dialects. The persistence of violations such as *rayira ('instruct'), tsvayira ('sweep'),* and *mahewu ('sweet beer')* demonstrates that speaker-writers transfer their spoken variants directly into writing, reflecting strong dialectal identities, which is an indication that the Shona 'standard' orthographic norms fail to fully capture the lived phonology of the language. Therefore, the difficulty lies in the disconnection between orthographic norms and natural speech patterns. What seems intuitive in speech is regarded as incorrect in writing. While orthography aims for economy and standardisation, it ignores natural glide insertion, making the rule harder for writers to internalise and consistently apply.

The other rule that poses problems for speaker-writers is the rule that does not allow them to insert <v, w, y> between vowels on the same level that is high, mid, or low, as in <umboo> 'evidence', <muboora> 'vegetable' and <teerera> 'listen'. This means that the alternative spellings <umbowo, mubowora> and <teyerera> are not permitted. In practice, the recommended standard form is ignored, and speakers whose general tendency is to write in dialect use the alternative form. This rule is a phonotactic constraint that forces vowel sequences to remain pure when the vowels are of equal height, although the spellings which are not permitted show broader issues of dialectal influence on orthographic standardisation, where the written norm may not fully align with lived linguistic practices. The problem for speaker-writers arises because in natural spoken discourse, especially under dialectal influence or phonological pressure, speakers may epenthesise glides for ease of articulation. This means that they are tempted to insert <w> or <y> as transition sounds between two vowels of equal height, even though orthographic rules forbid it. This difficulty reflects the tension between spoken phonological processes and standardised orthographic conventions, and this shows how orthographic rules sometimes contradict natural phonological intuition, creating a site of resistance and error for learners and writers.

In *Ravai ChiShona, the* primers and readers (Chinyenze & Sithole, 2007) are written in the ChiKaranga dialect rather than in '*standard' Shona*. Examples include: *ravai* (ChiKaranga) vs *verenga* (standard Shona) → 'read', *akavudza* vs *akaudza* → 'told', *haaizomuhwira vurombo* vs *haaizomunzwira urombo* → 'he will never forgive/feel pity', *pakavumbwa* vs *pakaumbwa* → 'was created'. This demonstrates lexical and phonological divergence between dialect and standard form. The series reflects non-standard orthographic representations influenced by ChiKaranga. Example: *rhori* (lorry)(ChiKaranga) vs *rori* (standard Shona).

The intrusive /h/ marks a breathy voice, which is a distinctive phonetic feature in the Karanga dialect, but is excluded in the standard orthography. Chimhundu (2005) supports extending orthography to include intrusive <h> (for example, *rhori (lorry)*, *mbhaura (brazier)*, *ndhari (traditional beer)*, *nghanunu (big gun with wheels*) to capture dialectal phonetic realities. Although Doke's 1931 unification of Shona was intended to eliminate dialectal writing systems and create a uniform orthography, the *Ravai ChiShona* series contradicts this aim by preserving ChiKaranga in formal education materials, suggesting a dialectal resistance to standardisation (Mazuruse, 2015). *Ravai ChiShona* demonstrates how dialectal realities challenge the ideological goals of language standardisation in Zimbabwe. This represents a form of dialectal resistance, where they lived linguistic practices of communities undermine prescriptive norms of 'standard Shona.' Orthographically, the series raises critical questions, showing that the current Shona orthography may not fully capture Shona's phonetic diversity, suggesting a need for orthographic reform to reflect all dialects equitably (Chimhundu, 2005).

The Manyika dialect uses <w> in class 2 affixes, resulting in forms like *wana* (children), instead of the <v> found in standard Shona, which gives *vana* (children). Manyika allows /nga-, nge-, ngo-/ where 'standard' Shona restricts usage to <na-, ne-, no->, which shows a morphophonemic variation in the realisation of associative markers. Both instances highlight that the codified standard Shona orthography excludes Manyika-specific features, forcing Manyika speakers to adapt or suppress their dialectal forms when writing in "standard" Shona. The broader implication is that dialectal variation is treated as "error" rather than legitimate linguistic difference, shaping literacy practices and cultural identity among Manyika speakers. The use of ChiKaranga and Manyika forms by speaker-writers reflects natural linguistic identity, regional pride, and the difficulty of imposing a homogeneous standard on a language with rich dialectal diversity

Publishing barriers affecting Shona speaker-writers

The interviews conducted with editors, publishers, and language experts revealed divergent yet overlapping perspectives on the challenges and consequences of publishing in a standardised Shona with dialect bias. The development of Shona literature faces significant publishing barriers rooted in the dialect bias of standardisation. Publishers have drawn attention to the market forces that privilege the standard form of Shona, often at the expense of dialectal richness. Publisher A said, "Printing costs and curriculum adoption processes favour uniform texts. Producing multiple dialect editions is idealistic but financially risky."

Although publishing houses may try to mitigate bias by commissioning authors from various regions, yet the final output typically converges on the standard form during editing. Editors act as institutional gatekeepers, enforcing orthographic and lexical conformity that restricts writers from experimenting with dialectal forms. Zimunya (2011) claimed to have taken 10 years to publish his anthology because local publishers insisted that he write in 'standard' Shona, a demand too hard to meet, as he indicated on the back cover of his poetry anthology that burned with pride and passion for his language and culture (Zimunya, 2011). This results in the silencing of authentic voices and the loss of regional linguistic forms in Shona literature. Since schools and curricula emphasise standard Shona, readers are less exposed to dialectal literature, making publishers reluctant to take financial risks on non-standard works. In essence, publishing in a standardised Shona with dialect bias creates a cycle of exclusion which stifles the growth of Shona literature, preventing it from fully capturing the linguistic and cultural plurality of Zimbabwe. As authors are discouraged from writing in their dialects, the rich oral traditions, proverbs, and unique idioms of these communities are not preserved in written form. The publishing industry, tied to the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education's textbook approval process, often avoids dialectal texts to secure national adoption. According to Zimunya (2011), writers from marginalised dialect groups struggle to publish works in their native dialects, as publishers often prefer the standardised Zezuru-based Shona. This restricts linguistic diversity in literature and limits the expression of cultural and regional identities, thereby discouraging young writers from non-Zezuru backgrounds and reducing the volume and variety of Shona literary texts.

In the context of Shona in Zimbabwe, the process of standardisation has historically favoured the Zezuru dialect, particularly in written form, publishing, and education, while marginalising Karanga, Manyika, Korekore, and Ndau varieties. This has continued to shape the production of Shona literature in Zimbabwe. According to Gora (2018), this bias creates a disparity, as the standardised form is perceived as the "correct" or prestigious version, while other dialects like Karanga, Korekore, Manyika, and Ndau are often relegated to informal, spoken-only domains. Linguists and education specialists stressed that writers from marginalised dialect groups face rejection in publishing or heavy editorial changes to conform to "standard Shona," often leading to distortion of cultural authenticity and loss of indigenous identity markers. Consequently, Shona literature development is skewed toward the dominant dialects, which risks producing a homogenised and less representative body of texts. This has pedagogical consequences: learners from non-dominant dialect backgrounds may feel alienated when their speech and cultural expressions are not reflected in classroom literature.

Publishing houses, editors and language reviewers are trained within the framework of standard Shona and act as gatekeepers of what counts as "acceptable" Shona literature, thereby rejecting dialect-influenced orthography. Government textbook approval systems often favour standardised works, discouraging dialect-rich publications. Musaemura Zimunya (2011) argues that works of literature in these less publicised indigenous languages have suffered from insufficient publicity in an inconsiderate society and environment. Writing and publishing in a *standardised* language with a dialect bias, especially within Shona literature in Zimbabwe, directly impacts literary development and educational equity, often fostering dialectal *resistance* and underrepresentation of certain dialect groups. Editors and examiners historically enforce the 1967 "standard" orthography even where it under-represents segmental contrasts found in other dialects, narrowing what is considered 'correct' or 'publishable.' This continues to funnel manuscripts toward Zezuru-leaning forms and lexicon.

Language Identity and Dialectal Revitalisation in Shona Literature

In his poem, *Korekore*, Mutepaire (nd) deliberately infuses Korekore dialectal vocabulary such as *vadoramba* (standard Shona: vakaramba, "refused"), *kukorewa* (standard: kudhakwa, "being drunk"), *kupasana* (standard: kupanana, "giving each other"), *idozara* (standard: yakazara, "it is full"), *majiro* (standard:

madyiro, "how they eat"), and *bodzi* (standard: mumwe chete, "one only"). Similarly, Nickson Mufutumari in his unpublished poem *Rova ngoma Chona* also demonstrates dialectal assertion by using Korekore lexical items that depart from 'standard' Shona conventions. For instance, *inoreketa* instead of *inotaura* ("it speaks"), and *oidzemurayo ngoma* instead of *oirova ngoma* ("beating the drum").

Both poets, therefore, consciously foreground Korekore linguistic markers, transforming their poetry into a medium of dialectal resistance and cultural affirmation. This practice can be understood as an act of ethnolinguistic vitality, where linguistic difference is mobilised to preserve identity and heritage, showing resistance against marginalisation within the Shona language hierarchy. Thus, the works of Mutepaire (nd) and Mufutumari (nd) exemplify how dialectal writing creates a counter-hegemonic literary space, ensuring that Korekore does not remain a "subordinate" oral variant but enters the domain of written cultural expression, contesting the dominance of standardised forms. They show that language is central to ethnic identity and cultural continuity, and poetry becomes a vehicle for asserting that vitality.

Unpublished poems from Korekore poets demonstrate that the two poets Mutepaire (2024) and Mufutumari (2024) have composed Korekore poems using a distinct Korekore dialect with the idea of reviving and promoting the variety alienated by the Shona Language Committee. These two poets curve and project a distinct space for their Korekore dialect in their poems thereby deliberately inflecting distinct Korekore dialect markers in a way that raises the visibility and possibly the Korekore ethnolinguistic vitality. Their use of the Korekore variety is more than a mere expression but a form of cultural preservation in the face of 'dominant' language varieties.

Discussion

The codified 'standard' Shona orthography excludes minority dialects, forcing their speakers to adapt or suppress their dialectal forms when writing in "standard" Shona. Dialectal variation is treated as "error" rather than legitimate linguistic difference, shaping literacy practices and cultural identity among Shona speakers. According to Lukianenko (2024), the imposition of a standardised Shona language in Zimbabwean education and publishing cannot be divorced from broader debates on language ideology, power, and epistemological erasure. Standardisation, while ostensibly intended to

unify, has often been an instrument of domination, where dominant dialects, particularly Zezuru, are elevated as proxies of linguistic legitimacy, while other dialects are marginalised. This hierarchy reflects deeper structures of power, privileging speakers aligned with the "standard" and disempowering those whose linguistic repertoires fall outside its sanctioned boundaries. From the perspective of linguistic imperialism, standard Shona replicates on a local scale the same hegemonic processes by which colonial languages subdued indigenous tongues.

Just as English displaced African languages, so does the "standard" displace minority Shona dialects, producing an internal coloniality, and this internal hierarchy fosters epistemological erasure where the knowledge systems, oral traditions, and creative expressions embedded in dialects such as Korekore, Manyika, or Karanga are delegitimised as "incorrect" or "non-standard" (Ahmed & Rajkhowa, 2025). The result is not simply a linguistic preference but a narrowing of epistemic horizons: what counts as "true" Shona literature is pre-emptively determined by orthographic and dialectal exclusion. This delegitimisation creates barriers to participation, comprehension, and self-expression, leading to what can be described as dialectal disempowerment, a condition where learners' creative and cognitive potential is curtailed by systemic bias in orthography and curricular representation. In effect, publishing and pedagogical practices naturalise inequality by encoding dialect bias into the very structures of literacy. When framed within global discourses on minority languages' rights, these struggles mirror the plight of indigenous and minority languages worldwide, where demands for linguistic justice confront entrenched ideologies of homogenisation. A decolonial approach would demand not only the recognition of dialectal multiplicity within Shona but also the transformation of curricula and publishing practices to reflect that multiplicity as a source of epistemic richness rather than a deficit. At the level of creative freedom, dialectal exclusion narrows the literary imagination.

In the Zimbabwean context, the dominant ideology is that "Standard Shona" is the correct, pure, and proper form, while other dialects are "corrupt," "rural," or "less developed." This echoes Lukianenko's (2024) critique of colonial language regimes, where creative autonomy is stifled by imposed linguistic norms. In Shona literature, orthographic standardisation thus not only regulates communication but polices cultural identity, literary innovation, and the preservation of diverse historical memories. Ultimately, the very tools meant to promote national cohesion risk undermining educational equity,

epistemic justice, and creative pluralism. A genuinely decolonised education system would embrace multilingualism and multi-dialecticisms, recognising all varieties of Shona as equally valid and valuable for teaching and learning.

Drawing from Bourdieu's (1977) concept of linguistic capital, this paper argues that the dialect bias in Standard Shona, by creating a form of "linguistic capital" that is unevenly distributed, perpetuates speaker-writer inequality. This creates a "monolingual mindset" within a multilingual reality. Stroud and Kerfoot (2021) critiques the colonial logic of fixing African languages into standardised, orthographically uniform systems, since this erases internal variation and suppresses indigenous ways of knowing and speaking.

In the Shona context, the standard language is not neutral, but it is an ideological tool that privileges identities and literacies. Similar dynamics are observed in South Africa, where standard isiXhosa and isiZulu have been elevated in schooling and publishing, marginalising regional varieties and suppressing oral and dialectal forms (Kamwangamalu, 2010). Taringa (2024) further notes that for Karanga-speaking children, Standard Shona is so different it can feel as foreign as English, raising a "cultural capital" barrier in early education. Dialectal resistance emerges in literature through writers' stylistic and lexical choices that foreground marginalised dialects, both as a form of cultural preservation and as subtle protest against standardisation. Literature in Shona is a vital carrier of culture, facilitating the transmission of values, worldview, and history; because of dialect bias, some communities experience loss of cultural and linguistic identity, as their dialects are underrepresented in textbooks, exams, and literary works. Musaemura Zimunya (2011) concurs that works of literature in these less publicised indigenous languages have suffered from insufficient publicity in an inconsiderate society and environment, and he believes that the 'standard' Shona phenomenon must be discarded in the publishing industry since Shona is like a river that is made up of many tributaries.

The current problems and debates relating to standard Shona vocabulary can all be explained in terms of a system in which speaker-writers of different dialects expect to represent all their distinctive speech sounds accurately, which is not possible in practice. As a result, all speaker-writers of marginalised dialects will of necessity experience problems of one kind or another, depending on the peculiarities of their dialect or sub-dialect with the conventions of the current 'standard' Shona. The rules of writing outlined in the current orthography are based on semantic and grammatical features rather than phonological accents

(Chimhundu, 2005). This has complicated the situation for novice speaker-writers in that they are failing to see how the written word matches the spoken word since they use penultimate length or stress as a word marker in their daily speech. The use of the hyphen in reduplicated words is another area where speaker-writers face some problems. Their problem is when to use a hyphen and when not to, especially in reduplicated verb stems, nouns, adjectives, and idiophones. Challenges arise when speaker- writers try to write the words as reduplicated speech forms to show intensity or emphasis. According to Chimhundu (2005), current orthography has a lot of imperfections since it has not been revised since 1967 and should be changed based on the statement of rules from semantic and grammatical elements to phonological accent, so that the speaker-writers can see more clearly how written Shona follows spoken Shona by using penultimate length or stress as a word marker.

Conclusion

This study has examined the implications of writing and publishing in a standardised Shona language marked by dialect bias, with a focus on its impact on literature development in Zimbabwean education. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of cultural and linguistic capital and insights from decolonial linguistics, the analysis demonstrates that privileging one dialect within the standardisation process entrenches speaker-writer inequalities and limits the scope of literary expression. While standardisation may undeniably facilitate the creation of a unified linguistic framework, fostering accessibility and consistency in the teaching and dissemination of Shona in Zimbabwe, it has offered a monolithic version of Shona, thereby underrepresenting Manyika, Karanga, and Korekore speaker-writers. Furthermore, writers from underrepresented dialects have always missed out on the opportunity to publish and engage with the full spectrum of their linguistic and cultural heritage further entrenching these inequities. Consequently, members from Manyika, Karanga, and Korekore dialect groups are slowly choosing to speak in their native dialects and genuine self-expression, thus resisting the hegemony of standardised Shona. Yet by maintaining their dialects in literature, their works present a counter-narrative to the perceived genocide of minority dialects, creating a literary platform on which marginalised identities may find refuge. In a practical sense, the findings highlight a need for educational and publishing policies that are inclusionary, policies that view dialectal diversity as an asset rather than an obstacle.

Recommendations

The study recommends dialectical inclusion and multi-dialectal usage in the standardisation process to enhance diversity and inclusivity in the literary landscape, sharpening Shona speaker-writer skills and developing culturally customised literature for education in Zimbabwe. In education, the curriculum should be reformed to be more dialect-inclusive as a way of curbing linguistic hegemony and democratising access to literature in all Shona dialects through documentation, preservation and use in educational curricula.

Research must come up with a national policy that ensures that language boards are fully functional to oversee the development and standardisation of Shona language in Zimbabwe. Publishers should be encouraged, perhaps through policy incentives, to accept and promote works written in different Shona dialects. Monolithic standard language policies must be rethought in favour of pluralistic approaches that affirm linguistic diversity and foster inclusive educational and publishing ecosystems. Digital platforms and social media could provide alternative spaces for dialectal revitalisation through online media, bypassing traditional gatekeepers and rigid state-controlled publishing structures.

A decolonial approach to Shona language and literature should challenge the "standard" and promote an inclusive national literature that values linguistic diversity as central to Zimbabwean identity and culture. At the school level, dialect awareness and comparative language perspectives should be embodied in pedagogical practices to strengthen learners' confidence and their identity as language users. For the publishing industry, promoting publishing in different Shona versions would expand the literary terrain, secure diversity and a more accurate portrait of Zimbabwe's cultural space. Future research should explore how tensions between standardised and dialectal Shona are understood and mediated by learners, teachers and writers in actual classroom and publishing settings. Terminology harmonisation, publishing in minority dialects, and creative literary work are recommended strategies to support dialect revitalisation and intellectualisation.

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